

THE WAYS TEACHERS DO THE THINGS THEY DO Differentiation in Middle Level Literacy Classes

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In this qualitative study, the author explored the concept of differentiation in urban, suburban, and rural language arts classrooms. The overall goal of understanding how differentiation occurred in these classrooms led to the following specific intentions: (1) to identify teachers' understandings of differentiation, (2) to understand their implementation of differentiated instruction for their students, especially those who underachieve or those for whom English is their second language, across an academic year, and (3) to understand students' and teachers' views of the challenges and successes of differentiation attempts. Using data collected from the classrooms of 9 teachers and across 135 classroom observations and interviews with students and teachers, the author unveiled the following attributes linked to these teachers' differentiation practices: (1) differentiation is more than a classroom event, (2) the classroom climate contributes to differentiation options and practices, (3) differentiation entails attention to affective and cognitive variations, and (5) activities drive differentiation practices.

Differentiation. Teacher educators call for it and researchers explore it. I want to understand its interpretation and use by classroom teachers. In that quest, I am reminded of the words of Clifford Geertz (1973) who states, "If you want to understand what a science is you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do" (p. 9). I act on that suggestion by turning an eye to the differentiation practices of

middle school teachers in urban, rural, and suburban settings. This overall goal led to the following specific purposes: (1) to identify teachers' understandings of differentiation, (2) to understand their implementation of differentiated instruction for their students, especially those who underachieve or those for whom English is their second language, across an academic year, and (3) to understand students' and teachers' views of the challenges and successes of differentiation attempts.

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THEORETICAL AND SCHOLARLY LINKS

As Tracey and Morrow (2006) attest, “theories and models can be used to understand situations” (p. 183). These choices become foundational for casting our research and practices. In my consideration of the myriad of options that exist for education in general and reading in particular, I acknowledge the many interactions of theories and models that lead to teachers’ instructional practices and students’ reading processes. My years as a teacher, collaborations with other teachers, and subsequent roles as a researcher and teacher educator lessen my ability to point a singular arrow at the premises that guide my thinking. For me, the complexity of these events and processes lead to the crisscrossing of several sets of theoretical stances. Therefore, I take an atypical turn and tap Spiro’s concepts of cognitive flexibility (2004a) and principled pluralism (2004b). As Spiro explains, cognitive flexibility addresses the tendency to oversimplify complex phenomena by allowing multiple representations. Principled pluralism allows the assembly of elements that apply in the moment rather than being harnessed to a single (and perhaps ill suited) explanatory perspective. In combination, this freedom of appropriate selection harmonizes with the basic tenets of differentiation. Just as one type of instruction does not apply to all students, I believe that the same holds true for theoretical stances. To invoke Spiro’s phrase and apply it to learning, instruction, and theoretical premises, “it all depends” (2004b, p. 655).

My choice of stances provides more than a backdrop for my investigation of differentiation. I concur with Shanahan (2005) that “theory gives my findings meaning; it helps me to interpret what I see” (p. 10). By acknowledging my overall theory and making it explicit, I attempt to lessen the possibility that I turn my investigation into an “activist pursuit in which we convince the community to move in a particular ideological direction” (p. 11).

In combination with my theoretical positioning, several lines of existing scholarship apply to this investigation. As expected, the scholarship on differentiation provides a key line of inquiry. Based on my examination of it, several important concerns arise. First, the concept of differentiation does not receive empirical attention. Instead, researchers tend to look at a topic (e.g., vocabulary, comprehension, literature groups) and how differentiation applies to that specific area. Considering how differentiation works as a collective approach for a classroom has not been tackled. To further complicate this concern, and perhaps the reason for it, scholars do not employ a consistent definition of differentiation in their theoretical and empirical work. Several definitions arise. Scholars like Turner (2005) and Jimenez (1997) address differences within an identified group of students or specify a component of literacy and offer various strategies for addressing it. They do not directly use the term, differentiation, but do promote the importance of instructional options. In a second direction, scholars pose suggestions of things that teachers might do and offer directions for teachers to follow (e.g., Gregory & Chapman, 2007). Others, like Tomlinson (2001), treat differentiation as a process. They encourage teachers to consider categories such as content, process, and product. Others hitch differentiation to assessment and underscore a movement from assessment to lesson design (e.g., Walpole & McKenna, 2007). These scholars treat differentiation as a philosophy—a way of thinking about literacy teaching and learning. A final group proposes technology as a vehicle to enact differentiation. Egbert (2007) offers one example of this group. She explores multimodal presentations and software programs as resources for differentiation. Like Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007), I expand beyond these definitions to embrace a more sociocultural consideration of differentiation. This broader view permits me to consider outside influences that might inform teachers’ differentiation beliefs and choices. Finally, the literature remains silent on if, how, and why

classroom teachers define and implement differentiation.

In addition to differentiation, the robust body of research that seeks to understand quality literacy practices and environments that maximize middle level students' literacy achievements applies (e.g., Deshler, Palincsar, Biancarosa & Nair, 2007; Pressley, Billman, Perry, Reffit, & Reynolds, 2007). These understandings provide a basis for creating hopes for teachers' practices. They also frame a way to pinpoint digressions or gaps that if known and used by their teachers might enhance students' literacy achievement.

As synthesized in Conley, Freidhoff, Sherry, and Tuckey (2008), several import premises hold wide acceptance and importance. First, fluency matters. While disagreement may remain about how best to achieve fluency and large debates occur over the direction of word identification strategies, readers who cannot say words quickly and accurately struggle to free their short term memory to attend to the ultimate goal of reading: comprehension. Then, students' literacy demands roam from discipline to discipline and they need to become equally facile across them. Finally, differences across students increase as they age. From students' social proclivities to their out of school literacy practices, adolescence becomes a complex time. Attending to the literacy achievement of all adolescents demands attention to the intertwining of their varied and unique social and literate selves. Those who struggle especially grab our attention (Lenski & Lewis, 2008). According to Lewis and Dahbany (2008), "we need to incorporate various literacy strategies that correspond with and enhance the developmental stages that adolescents are navigating. It will require our time" (p. 33). These combined understandings and perspectives hold promise for guiding my quest to understand the multifaceted dimensions that a consideration of differentiation for middle level teachers and students entails. I initially devoted my time to identify the current state of affairs: the differences that teachers actually encounter day by

day and moment by moment and how they currently respond to them.

METHOD

A qualitative design (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lancy, 1993; Merriam, 1988; Spradley, 1980; Stake, 1995) matched the direction of my research questions. The overall intention of this method seeks cultural understanding. While ethnographic in its general orientation (e.g., spending an academic year in the selected classrooms and tapping data collection options consistent with ethnography), it had a singular focus—differentiation. This intention to understand a specific concept (differentiation) aligned this study with the expectations of a microethnography (Roe, 1994). However, and as explained in a subsequent section, it moved into the classification of cross-case analysis by including an array of classrooms across three types of locations (Borman, Clarke, Cotner, & Lee, 2006). While exhibiting a hybrid of pieces from several specific qualitative traditions, this research maintained the cultural understanding perspective associated with qualitative method (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). In completing this task, I needed to balance an emic and etic perspective (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). In using the emic perspective, my goal was to grasp the teachers' and students' viewpoints. In switching to the etic perspective, I directly addressed my research questions across teachers and locations. In combination, I strived to obtain an accurate and complete account of differentiation's need and uses in these teachers' classroom contexts.

Research Sites

I concur with Bloome (2005) that "the task, in part, for the researcher interested in understanding the meaning of what people are doing is to identify the people context and the action context within which the acting and reacting is occurring" (p. 278). For this study, I held the

need to place myself in the classrooms of typical teachers and their students. To expand the breadth of understandings, my research locales included the classrooms of nine teachers at four middle schools in the northwest. The schools differed by location (one urban, two suburban, and one rural), size, academic organization (integrated language arts and social studies or separate subjects), and student populations (second language learners, incidence of free and reduced lunch, ethnic and cultural diversity). They were located within a 100-mile range.

Participants

Teachers. To select the teachers for this investigation, I used purposeful sampling. This approach seeks to maximize insights around the phenomenon of interest (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). In this instance, I selected male and female teachers who varied in important ways. They held a range of experience and educational backgrounds. One was in the first five years of her teaching, while others had taught 20 years or more. Five of the teachers held a master's degree and one had a PhD in literacy education. As undergraduates, seven were trained in an elementary education program. One was a history major in a secondary program and one majored in secondary Spanish. While these teachers taught in a state with a middle level endorsement, none of these teachers held it. In the end, nine teachers, three male and six female, agreed to participate in the study.

Students. The students of these teachers also participated. They engaged in informal conversations with me throughout the observation periods, and a subset of them participated in individually conducted interviews conducted toward the conclusion of the school year.

The researcher. As the researcher, my challenge became portraying the wide variations of the students with whom the teachers interacted and the many ways that they planned and responded to these student differences.

Data Collection

Data came from several sources: field notes from 135 classroom observations (five observations for each teacher at the onset, middle, and end of the school year), informal conversations with teachers and students, semistructured interviews with the nine teachers, semistructured interviews with 30 students, and document analysis.

Field notes. The field notes stemmed from participant observation of these teachers' classrooms between August and June. Each observation included the entire class or block. Therefore, the time of the observation ranged from 50 minutes to a 3-hour period. These field notes provided a global account of each teacher's classroom organization and activities. They also afforded rich accounts of students' activities.

Teacher interviews. The teachers and I held informal conversations during each observation. I entered summaries of these exchanges in my field notes. I conducted semistructured interviews with them at the end of the final set of observations. (See Appendix A for the questions that guided this interview). Based on their responses, I asked follow-up questions to clarify or broaden their initial responses. At times, I inserted questions directly linked to events that I had observed or added questions linked to my overall purpose of understanding their use of differentiation in their classrooms and the challenges they encountered along the way. I transcribed these more formal interviews verbatim.

Student interviews. As with the teachers, I interacted informally with students during each observation period. I entered these exchanges into my field notes. During the final round of observations, I conducted individual and semistructured interviews with 30 students. While all students were offered this opportunity, and more than 30 expressed an interest, these students returned their parental consent forms. Before beginning the interview, all of these students gave permission for recording our conversation. (See Appendix B

for the questions that guided these interviews.) These students' responses offered important insights about their perceptions of differentiation, their teachers' efforts, and their responses to them. Because the findings from students became independently rich, they are mentioned here but reported in-depth elsewhere (Roe, 2009).

Data Analysis

Data analysis coincided with processes typical of qualitative method (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I began with the field notes for each teacher. Initially, I determined an activity episode (Gee, Michaels, & O'Connor, 1992) and noted the planned or in-the-moment modifications that the teacher made to accommodate student differences as it occurred. I then collapsed these findings within an observational segment and across the 15 observations. Next, I combined the data across teachers. As appropriate, I used frequency counts to better understand these teachers' individual strategies and those they shared in common during and across a school year. To assure the accuracy and sufficiency of the labels for each differentiation strategy, I narrowed or expanded the codings to allow representative and finely tuned categories. To analyze the teacher and student interviews, I expanded upon the classroom codes to label references to differentiation practices. Again, I analyzed individual interviews for the teachers and students and then looked across them. I analyzed the various documents by linking them to the witnessed differentiation activities and the teachers' and students' references to them. This intermingling of these data sources (Fielding & Fielding, 1986) allowed a rich understanding of the features of differentiation for these teachers, the forms that differentiation took at three points and across a school year, and its attributes within and across various locations and organizational arrangements. It also informed the meaning of differentiation for these teachers and their students (Diesing, 1971). Finally, I returned to existing research

to fit these findings within it. The use of Ethnograph (Qualis Associates, 1984), a computer program for aggregating coded qualitative data, facilitated this emic analysis scheme.

THE WAYS THESE TEACHERS DO THE THINGS THEY DO

A reporting of what I learned about differentiation must begin with my initial definition of it. Beyond the various orientations previously discussed, I came to generally believe that differentiation is anything and everything that teachers do. That broad definition, and in spite of the unease that so general of a definition generates, gave me the freedom to develop a more refined definition from my experiences with these teachers as opposed to overly specifying what I would count and exclude.

The specific findings include richly substantiated big pieces about differentiation and those more nuanced. Here, I straightforwardly offer a sampling of central and uncontested understandings that all of these teachers exhibited.

Differentiation: Beyond a Classroom Event

I begin with the piece that has previously received scant attention: the wider school context. Typically, differentiation is discussed as a classroom event and a teacher's responsibility. While both are true, they do not occur without the wider influence of things beyond the classroom walls and beyond the teacher's direct control or, in too many cases, influence. To establish the nature and import of these differences, I begin with a general description of these teachers' teaching contexts and then examine their potential influence on these teachers' differentiation options.

The rural context. The rural middle school housed grades six through eight. It had a large number of Native American students who attended a school on the reservation through the elementary grades. Some of these students

spoke in their native language. The school also had other students for whom English was a second language. It had one administrator, the principal, and a specialist who wore the hats of resource room, special education, and Title I teacher. During the previous year, the school received an award from the state superintendent of public instruction for its improved performance on the state test. In the seventh grade, this school blocked language arts which included reading and writing.

Because the school separated social studies and the language arts, I included two teachers from this site. The language arts teacher, Ms. Kendall (all names are pseudonyms), accepted this position in order to have a full time contract. She spent the rest of her teaching day at the high school where she taught Spanish, her area of content expertise. Because social studies was not at this point tested by the state, Ms. Kendall held the responsibility for test preparation. She used a booklet for test preparation activities that the school district provided. She used it regularly and faithfully. She had been a student in this district, and actually had her teaching partner, Ms. Flannery, as a teacher. Ms. Flannery taught the social studies class for the same group of students that Ms. Kendall had in her literacy block, a 2-hour period devoted to reading and writing. Ms. Flannery had taught for more than 30 years and was considering retirement at the end of the school year. She often mentioned how her health "slowed her down" and impacted her performance as a teacher. During my time in their classrooms, a paraprofessional entered for one of two purposes: to take students for testing or to supervise class during a teacher's absence. These teachers scarcely mentioned professional development. When Ms. Flannery did, she did not present it as an ongoing school initiative around student achievement or intentionally arranged activities designed to improve teacher practices.

The suburban schools. The two suburban schools were housed in the same district. At one school, the three teachers who taught the 3-hour reading/writing/social studies block for

seventh grade became participants. (I will call these teachers Mr. Grant, Mr. Reiner, and Mr. Stuart). The female teacher at the second suburban school (whom I will call Ms. Kraft) taught a seventh grade two hour class that combined language arts and social studies. These teachers had varied educational backgrounds. Mr. Reiner held an advanced degree in educational leadership and a principal certification. None of the other teachers have pursued formal educational training beyond their undergraduate studies. They had, as required by state law, completed the hours required for ongoing certification. Two, Ms. Kraft and Mr. Grant, were pursuing their final professional certification requirements. Mr. Stuart, who contemplated retirement at the end of the school year, was the most experienced (more than 20 years).

Each teacher's students came from families with a range of incomes. A large number qualified for free or reduced lunch. Mr. Grant had a student from Russia who spoke English haltingly. This student left the room to receive extra services for English language development. Mr. Reiner had a student who got pregnant during the school year and another who returned to school after spending several weeks in a rehabilitation program for substance abuse. Ms. Kraft had a student who joined her class after a lengthy expulsion from school.

During the observations in these teachers' classrooms, they received no assistance from paraprofessionals. They had access to a computer lab with enough computers for each student to work individually. Mr. Reiner used this lab regularly. He also had five working computers in his room in addition to the one for his personal use. Mr. Grant used the lab on occasion. Although some computers were in his room, his personal computer was the only one that worked. Mr. Stuart's students used the computers in the library when they went there to check out books or listen to a presentation from the librarian, but did not have a scheduled time for the lab during my observations. He had a personal computer which all teachers

used for grading, attendance, and communication with parents. Ms. Kraft's class was close to the computer lab, and her students made regular use of it. She would often split her class, allowing students to identify whether they needed to go to the lab or could further their work in the classroom. In her classroom, students had one computer and a printer available for their use in addition to the one for her personal use.

Without exception, these suburban teachers lamented the loss of services from programs designed for students with emotional and behavioral challenges. They discussed completing assessments mandated by the administrative office beyond the state test, but not professional development opportunities or initiatives. Finally, they each scheduled time to prepare for the state test. Mr. Reiner and Mr. Grant scheduled time for test preparation on each Friday. Mr. Grant and Ms. Kraft did this less frequently and without a regularly scheduled time commitment.

The urban school. The urban school served a large majority of students from low socioeconomic families. The teachers had a number of second language learners that included Hispanic and Russian students. The school received different grants that provided extra services for the students. For example, grant money provided fresh fruit for students to have during class and stocked a fruit and vegetable bar in the cafeteria which was available free of charge to students and teachers.

The three teachers taught blocked classes (social studies and language arts). They held advanced degrees. Ms. Calhoun held a PhD in literacy while Ms. Pound and Ms. Moffett had master degrees. Each took advantage of the school's computer lab and library facilities for student research projects and the selection of books for independent reading. In addition, Ms. Moffett often used a cart with enough laptop computers for each student in her room.

All seventh-grade teachers met as teams and with their disciplinary colleagues across teams. They also met to explore professional

development initiatives. This year's school focus was the use of assessment and differentiation. The teachers attended professional development sessions during the school day. They also had access to paraprofessionals. However, only one of the three teachers used them. She had one or two in her classroom during each observation period.

Across these three types of settings, these teachers' backgrounds, availability of support personnel, and mix of students played a role in the differences that they encountered and their options for responding to them. While each teacher could send unruly students from their classes, and most took advantage of this option at some point in the year, only the urban school had a formal school policy that teachers used. The urban school also stood alone in having a direction for professional development. While the rural school had the fewest services available for their students, the suburban schools suffered from adjusting to a reduction of services. The rural school had the only teacher placed in her position for convenience rather than choice or expertise. In spite of these school, personnel, and student variations, important similarities appeared in these teachers' attempt to differentiate.

Before turning to differentiation linked directly to academic standards, these teachers' attention to the classroom climate and the behaviors of students who distracted them from an exclusive focus on their ultimate academic goals warrant attention. While students presented different mixtures of cooperative and disruptive behaviors and teachers evidenced varying responses to them, none of these teachers escaped an attention to this area. Years ago, Duffy, Roehler, and Mason (1984) offered a graphic that placed comprehension instruction as the target and classroom management as one of the several pieces encircling it. The same reminder holds true for teachers' attempts to differentiate. Simply stated, a teacher's success in winning over students to the classroom's ebb and flow contributes to the time available for academic intentions.

Differentiation: Links to the Classroom Climate

Conformance to a classroom's behavior expectations competed with these teachers' literacy goals. Instead of immediately and exclusively attending to differentiation to help students to read, write, and attend to social studies, on many occasions these teachers settled for behavioral compliance devoid of students' intellectual engagement (Sizer, 1992). Overall, while the majority of students generally appeared to meet behavior expectations, they struggled to simultaneously act on their social needs and complete classroom activities. These tensions, for students and teachers, presented themselves in different ways and triggered various responses. For example, Ms. Flannery often grew tired of the many attempts to have Alex be productive and simply sent him from the room. Overall, she had the most consistent difficulties with student behavior. She would send them from class, threaten to call parents, or speak directly (but privately) to them about their behaviors. On some occasions, she offered these reprimands in front of other class members. Mr. Grant regularly repeated the name of one student ("Chavez, Chavez") to bring her back to the task at hand. He also resorted to moving students to the hall, reassigning their seats, or, on occasion, sending them to the office. Ms. Kraft would pose questions designed to have students examine their behaviors. She would also use comments that identified a behavior in a way that was lighthearted but firm. When these approaches failed, Ms. Kraft used the demerit system in place at her school. Mr. Stuart assigned those who caused trouble for him to seats isolated from other students. All teachers roamed the room to encourage an adjustment of behaviors. None of these teachers escaped the everyday behaviors most often linked to middle school students (e.g., excessive talking, roaming the room, straying from the task at hand, and generally allowing time to pass without attending to their responsibilities as a student). However, and as previously mentioned, Ms. Flannery

was the most challenged by caustic exchanges between students who often challenged her authority as a teacher and exhibited a contagious disregard for civility. Interestingly, Ms. Kendall did not experience this same level of inappropriate behavior when she had these same students.

While these students never exhibited extreme behaviors (e.g., fighting or committing physically threatening actions), they required teacher vigilance and ongoing attention. These events grab a teacher's attention to varying degrees, but they exist. Ms. Flannery was worn down by them. Ms. Kraft took them in stride. All teachers attend to them.

Differentiation: Attention to Affective Dimensions

These teachers' attention to differentiation regularly included an affective aspect. With the current emphasis on the National Reading Panel Report (2000) and its exclusion of affective arenas such as motivation from the areas that they investigated, these teachers' ongoing attention to it allows affective concerns to return to the spotlight. In addressing them, these teachers did many things to get to better know their students. For example, at the beginning of the year all teachers had students complete a written product (which sometimes included an art component) to describe themselves. The students' products offer stark contrasts. For example, the urban students wrote about worries—the divorce of parents, a concern about leaving their homes or apartments, the poor health of grandparents, or taxing relationships with stepparents or schoolmates. The rural students, the majority of whom were Native American, often referenced their roots to their tribe and community. The suburban students' comments remained lighthearted with attention turning to birthdays, parties with friends, and vacations with family members. However, and regardless of the tone and content of the students' products, these teachers' attempts to know their students broaden the cognitive tone more apparent in existing schol-

arship about differentiation. Instead, these teachers' actions contribute to Britzman's (2006) exploration of the emotional component of learning. Just like Britzman, these teachers detour from the familiar terrain of learning as purely psychological. Unfortunately, while examples existed for the convergence of affective and psychological pieces for middle level students' literacy (e.g., Roe, 2001), these teachers seldom united their desire to know their students with academic intentions.

Some teachers did use these understandings as a rationale for making exceptions to academic or behavioral expectations. For example, Mr. Reiner, and on Mondays only, allowed Tyrone to sleep during class and regularly disengage from its activities. As he explained, "I don't know what happens to him over the weekend, but he is useless on Mondays." All of these teachers invoked students' backgrounds to further explain achievement concerns. Students, too, talked about home and family input that impacted their school work. Many mentioned having computers at home that allowed them to do more sophisticated looking products. Others mentioned the assistance of a parent in completing a product. For some, however, neither computers nor an adult was available to offer advice or direction.

An incident that occurred in Ms. Pound's room during my first round of observations typified the challenging nature of affective events. On this day, she took the students to the computer lab to work on a brochure project for social studies. In the lab, two paraprofessionals joined Ms. Pound and her 22 students. Many differences emerged in students' use of the technology. They asked questions such as "How do you get pictures?" "How do you get to the share drive?" and "How do you use a flash drive?" As Ms. Pound and the two assistants attended to these questions and others, Miranda and the girls who sat around her began rearranging their tops. Miranda asked me if I had a clothespin in my bag that she wanted to use to tighten her T-shirt. She and another girl then used the television screen as a

mirror to adjust their clothing. During this time, Ms. Pound received a phone call. A male student, Sam, walked to Ms. Pound and told her that he was having an anxiety attack. She suggested that he go for a walk outside. (The computer lab had a door that opens onto an outside area.) "What if I'm not done by the end of the day?" Sam asked, referring to his brochure product. Ms. Pound assured him that everything would be fine. He returned from his walk, and within a few minutes told Ms. Pound that he was having another attack. This time, she took him outside and walked with him as he tried to get his breathing under control. Upon her return, a female student, Alyssa, accused Marion of "copying." Marion defended herself to Ms. Pound by saying that she was just receiving help. Throughout this period, Ms. Pound encouraged all students to "work, work" and reminded them of the time remaining to finish their brochure project. As true of these teachers' classroom lives, their students' completion of an assigned task and the teacher's time available for offering assistance were limited by competing distractions as they responded to the personal needs *and* educational gaps of their students.

Differentiation: The Prominence of Activities

For each teacher, and as the above event indicated, classroom activities became the engine that drove teachers' differentiation efforts and students' attention to its cognitive demands. To support their completion, teachers monitored students' work progression by roaming the room and varying the time spent with individual students. When they paused, they would sit by students to explain or assist their efforts or direct students to text pages or resources that could provide answers. From their observations and individual interactions, teachers often rephrased an explanation or modeled a specific process for the whole class. The intention was very direct: assignment completion. While they often linked these instructional comments to impor-

tant literacy understandings, their presentation lacked the identification of a particular audience and the structural features of explicit instruction that would increase its power and applicability for individual students. Linked to this finding, teachers' attention to a finished product overshadowed their attention to literacy processes. These teachers valued literacy processes, but when they did explain or model one, it was primarily reactive rather than proactive, offered to the whole class, and not prompted by previously obtained formative assessment results. In addition, teachers attended to students' developing a work ethic and they differentiated to promote it. For example, their activity design often offered choices and fostered students' independence as workers. The teachers further relied on routines to encourage students' development of these dispositions.

Beyond the activities linked to social studies or language arts, and as previously mentioned, these teachers regularly designed classroom activities to replicate the format of state mandated tests. They often referenced the students' need to do well on them as justification for these exercises. None of these text driven activities were modified or adjusted to meet student differences and needs.

As a reminder, while these general similarities appeared across teachers, stark differences emerged across their teaching contexts that impacted differentiation attempts. Teachers at the urban school had more curricular mandates, team meetings, and professional development sessions during the school day. They also had more external supports (i.e., a literacy coach and paraprofessionals). The rural and suburban teachers more often noted the disappearance of support systems (e.g., special programs, personnel, classroom materials). The urban teachers also administered more required formative assessments. They received and discussed their results at team meetings. However, these findings did not seem to inform their daily selection of activities. The suburban and rural schools acquired data from students' use of a computer testing system

where students took multiple choice tests based on a self-chosen book. The suburban schools identified library books by level that coincided with students' identified reading levels. However, only one suburban teacher expected students to choose a book that coincided with them. At no time during these observations did any teachers create instructional groups based on academic differences or needs identified by the data available to them. All schools did use test results to assign poor performing students to an additional reading class.

To summarize, these teacher and context results exposed several dimensions of teachers' literacy differentiation: (1) teachers' attention to differentiation goes beyond the primarily cognitive aspects so prevalent in existing research, (2) the wider school context plays a role in a teacher's differentiation options, (3) a selected activity provides a focal point for differentiation, (4) teachers tend to differentiate for product completion rather than planning for the use of literacy processes, and (5) these teachers seldom link assessment findings, affective concerns, and instructional choices. State testing mandates remained in teachers and students' minds until the administration of the state test which spanned a two-week period in April.

AND SO? DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

An attention to actual classroom practices holds the potential to inform the sufficiency of existing differentiation proposals, identify gaps in existing research, and further connect research and practice around the important concept of differentiation. As I revisit all that I witnessed and learned, several points loom large. I share them with an important limitation in mind: my understandings are limited by what I learned from the teachers and classrooms upon which this investigation resides. While I took steps to invite generalizability to other educational contexts, it remains a fragile

attempt. Differentiation, after all, turns on contextual variation.

First, any attention to differentiation must address its many facets. Like these participants, teachers do not have the leisure to focus singularly on a dimension of literacy, a segment of their obligations to students, or even on a purely academic intention. Instead, their classroom lives present a much more complicated picture. In addition to a responsibility for all the pieces that contribute to an inviting classroom environment and literacy and social studies learning, teachers cannot turn a blind eye to the students' overall health and happiness. The affective pieces matter, teachers care about them, and they attend to them—must attend to them. As William James, an American philosopher, realized more than 50 years ago, "The rigorously impersonal view of science might one day appear as having been a useful eccentricity rather than the definitively triumphant position which the sectarian scientist at present so confidently announces it to be" (as cited in Barnard, 1997, p. 47). Likewise, the resources available to teachers and their students create more than differences. They pose the possibility for inequities. Teachers with the chance to tap support personnel and team and disciplinary colleagues have less lonely work. Instead of self-reflection, these teachers have opportunities for dialogue and formally arranged collegial exchanges. Students with computers at home or adults who support their homework completion can compensate for lost time in school—whether from an anxiety attack or the wandering of the adolescent mind. Further, as a consideration of these joint responsibilities suggests, an attention to differentiation extends beyond the boundaries of a single classroom or one teacher's purview. Some propose that it takes a village to raise a child. Seemingly, it takes educational and home communities to differentiate for a child's learning.

Second, a focus on activities provides a place to initiate a stronger attention to strate-

gies. Promoting students' success on classroom products and, as a result, improving students' course grades remains insufficient. From the research community, we know of many strategies that hold the potential to broadly impact students' literacy. In the main, these strategies did not assume a place of importance in any of these teachers' classrooms. And, this must be done in conjunction with their concern about students rather than placing them in conflict with this expectation.

Third, assessments that pinpoint students' strengths and needs and, as a result, inform teachers' decisions, deserve a stronger place in these teachers' classrooms. One state test administered late in the academic year does not allow a proactive response. Placing students in a software program that contains multiple choice tests for the books that students read should not take the place of assessment tools that direct broad instructional needs. To have product completion overshadow or substitute for an attention to strategy development leaves its development to chance. Shifts are in order. Results on systematically acquired formative and summative assessments can help bridge the gap that existed for these teachers between product and process.

Finally, a refining of the definition of differentiation is overdue. The technique of Mokume-gane comes to mind. This technique focuses on a fusing of various metals. Likewise, differentiation requires the blending and simultaneous attention to a multitude of features. For Mokume-gane and differentiation, "knowing what technique or action makes what patterns and effects is where the real knowledge and expertise is required" (Binion, 2004). This, then, directs our future work: to create a model of differentiation that encompasses its many features, test the model, and once verified, facilitate teachers' willingness and ability to build on and ultimately transform their practices. This will be hard work. The potential to improve the literacy attainments of our nations' students' makes this effort worthwhile.

APPENDIX A: TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

“In this interview, I want to better understand your use of differentiation in your classroom. I have a few prepared questions to initially guide our conversations.” (For each question use probes as appropriate to follow their lead and deepen their responses.)

- Tell me about the composition of your classroom.
- How do they differ as learners?
- Do you see your students’ differences as a plus or a problem?
- What do you do to account for these differences? Have you changed what you do as the year progressed? If so, what contributed to those shifts?
- Tell me about the materials you use. Are there other materials that you would like to have?

(Probes: titles, selection process)

- What challenges you the most to differentiate your instruction for your students?
- How do you view the contribution of your teaching colleagues, parents, principal, and other district personnel in contributing to these challenges or helping you to overcome them?
- As I’ve observed, I’ve wondered about a few things.

(Insert questions driven by the observations that link to students’ behaviors or the teacher’s responses.)

Is there anything that these questions didn’t cover that you want me to understand about your students’ differences and your attempts to address them?

APPENDIX B: STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I am interested in learning from you about how you describe yourself as a middle school student. I’m particularly interested in hearing you talk about your participation in your language arts and social studies classes and what you and your teacher do to help you succeed. In fact, sometimes I may ask about specific events that I have observed. I am the only one who will know that the comments came from you. Then, so I can concentrate on what you’re saying, I would like your permission to tape record our conversation. Is that OK with you?

Specific Questions:

- Tell me about yourself as a middle school student.

(Clarify as necessary and use prompts to obtain a fuller account of their ideas.)

- Do you consider yourself to be a good student?
- Tell me about the materials you use in class. How do you feel about them?

(Probe titles and their use of these materials.)

- Does every student in your class do the same thing? If yes, ask if they think that is a good idea. If no, ask how students differ in what they do.
- What do you do that allows you to do well in class? What interferes with your ability to do well?
- What does your teacher do that you find helpful in learning from the class?
- What do you wish your teacher would do to help you learn better?
- Did you notice any changes that the teacher made over the year that helped you learn better? (If yes, have them explain. If no, ask

if they ever wished the teacher had done something differently for them.)

Educators use the term, differentiation, to talk about what they do to help each student succeed. If you were a teacher, how would you differentiate in your language arts and social studies classes?

Is there anything else you would like me to know about you as a student and what a teacher might do to help you learn better that my previous questions didn't cover?

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